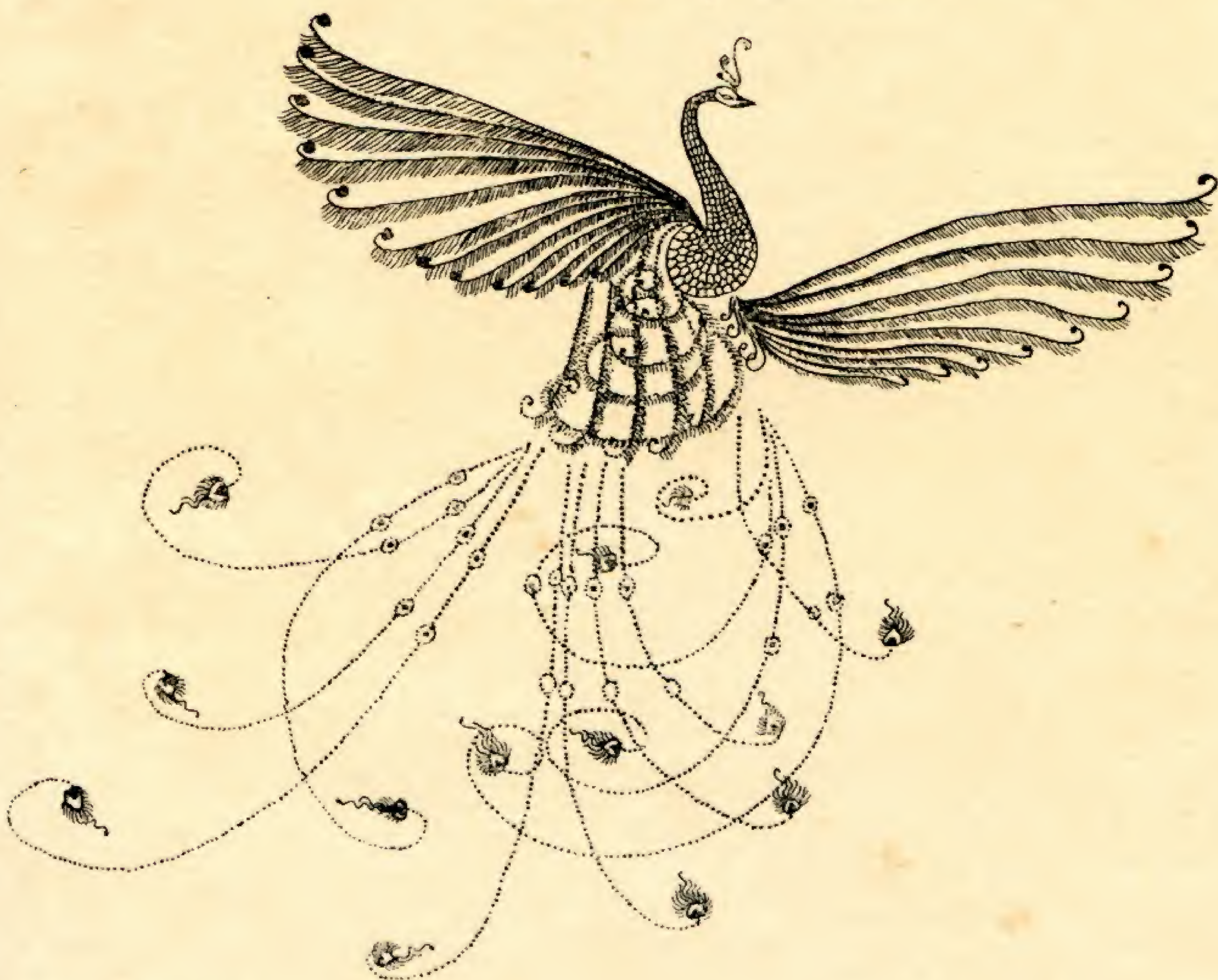


SCULPTURED MELODIES

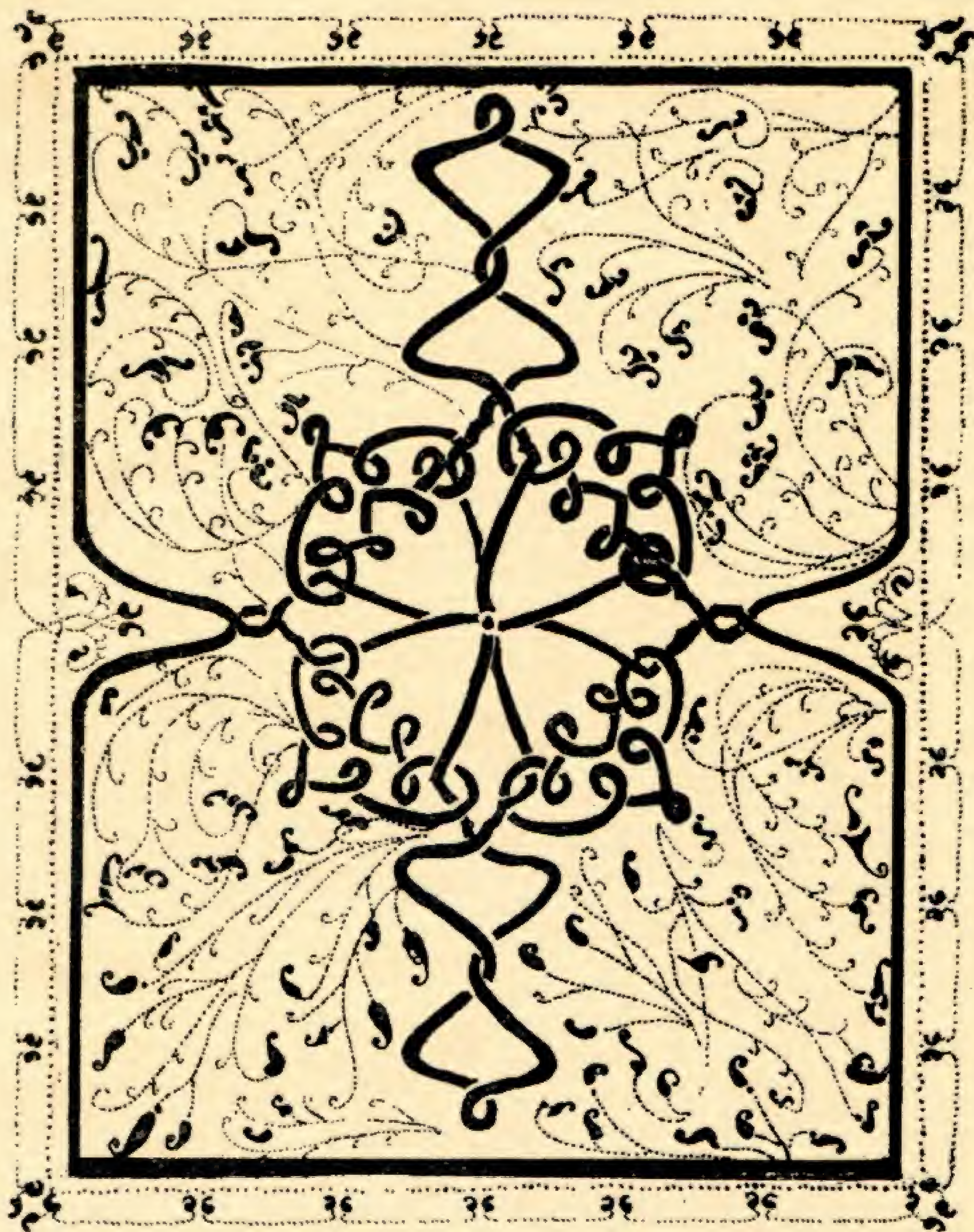
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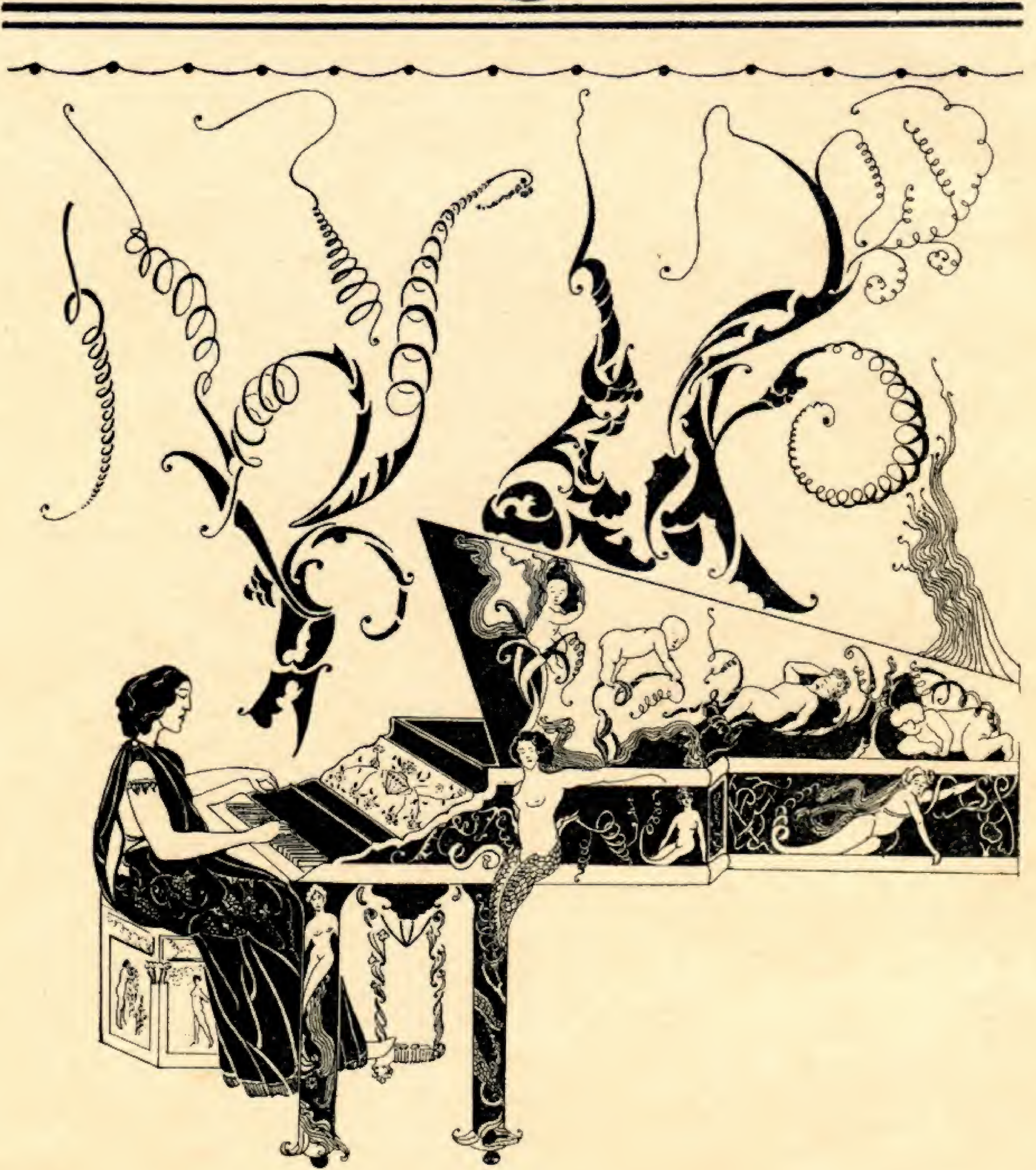
Illustrated by the Author



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SCULPTURED MELODIES







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ARAMENA was the most beautiful courtesan of decadent Rome. She came whence no one knew, but she was what the Court and the mob had longed for. Rich patricians paid ransom prices to have models made by great artists of her shapely limbs; and the sculptures of her shameless charms were beyond purchase by the revenue of a town.

At Tivoli, where the stream runs down the vine-clad side

of the hill, was her palace of sculptured bronze (where is it now ?) which the hot days and starry nights had tinted to the verdigris-green of her eyes. Of an evening she would sit by the water-side under a canopy of onyx studded with precious stones and play a viol of wondrous tone. Amongst the passers-by, perchance, one there was whose beauty would please her intent eyes, and she would beckon to her the boy or maid. And the people whispered that after days of debauch they were found lying naked, with a curious mark at the throat—and so it came that man and maid kept hidden the secret of the palace of bronze. . . .

Caramena gave a mighty feast, and Heliogabalus was there. Massive carved tables of marble formed the letter of a potent charm known to her. Overhead the pines and sycamores waved to a fitful breeze, whilst the fountain flung up streams of perfumed water ; and, as the jets of water rose and fell to break into myriad bubbles, hidden lights cast rainbows on the spray. On a dais she lay with the Emperor 'midst a disordered array of vessels of gold and precious stones—vessels of single amethysts ; cups of dark green emeralds, great stones scooped into exquisite shapes ; carafes of clear cool crystal ; all lay in a broken heap. As Heliogabalus drank each cup a slave behind him broke the vessel that had held the wine. Every guest reclined beside a beautiful virgin—they had been gathered from the villages and towns round about by a school of matrons.

In large vessels of silver, slaves brought various live fish and placed them before the guests. On a brazier of gold a slave cooked a purple fish ; as it felt the singeing oil it wailed like a child in pain—the guests clapped their hands and

cried applause with drunken frenzy. Curious monsters of the deep were tortured on the fire for the rabble. Along the tables were placed delicacies: lotus crystallised in Alpine honey; raw sturgeons in saffron and white wine; the ruddy bodies of locusts swam in honey and aromatics in vases of gold; tongues of nightingales cooked in camel's milk; peacocks, dressed in their full plumage, with its hundred jewelled eyes outspread, were stuffed with confections and sweet-smelling herbs. On platters of precious metal were piled slices of oranges, lemons, melons, plums and grapes, to be eaten after each course for cleaning the palate of the previous flavour. On moving tables of silver, slaves pushed whole calves cooked in various ways. From the Apennines was brought the snow that lay on golden salvers for the guests to eat, and the moulds were scented with musk and ambergris and rose. Wines in costly vessels of the famed glazed ware of Cyprus lay cooling on gleaming rocks of ice. . . .

The eyes of Caramena wandered to the nephew of the Emperor where the handsome youth lay sulking. Suddenly the Emperor, intercepting her glance, bent forward and tore the frail tissue from her shoulder, laying bare the white body; and the woman threw herself into his arms. As she fell back from his arms she glanced uneasily towards the nephew of the Emperor, and saw that a thin stream of blood trickled from the clenched fist of the anguished youth.

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The dew of the coming morning gleamed on a heap of human beings lying huddled in groups sprawling over tables and couches in drunken abandon. The white bodies of girls

were bleeding with rough usage—they had danced to a murderous tune, the recognised tune of the Roman erotic school: “Flowing blood is the wine of Love”—and their low moans sounded ghost-like in the still air of the approaching dawn. Now and again a drunken giant of the Guards with blows and curses would free himself from the heaving mass.

The Emperor lay snoring heavily upon his gorgeous couch, but he drowsed alone—and the place where his nephew had reclined was void. . . .

* * *

In the palace of bronze was a room of dark cedar-wood carved with various raptures of Love. Greek lamps lighted the room. An Indian god, wrought in silver and precious stones, stood on a heap of skulls, gazing into the gloom with supreme unconcern, its lips of deep red coral gleaming moist as fresh blood.

On a bed of golden tissue lay the nephew of the Emperor; and he gazed into the eyes of Caramena where she knelt beside his bed, his arms about her white shoulders as he spoke to her, drowsy with love: “What have I not that they have? What have they that I have not? Flavius, the pleb, called you his own. Julius of the Hills went about the streets boasting of the shift thou hadst sent him.”

And the woman answered fearfully: “But they died.”

“Ay, it is true; I never envied them when living, but dead I do. If the forfeit of thy love be the loss of life, why, I’ll pay it. Did I ever ask thee to give me thy love without its price?”

And the woman, pale as a lily, answered : “ It is because I love thee that I will have none of thee.”

But he gave a laugh of unbelief and scorn, and fell a-drowsing.

The arm that clasped the woman held her even in sleep.

Lightly she unclasped herself from his drowsy embrace and stood up by the bed, her lips moving nervously to the distracting thoughts of her tortured mind. She stood in conflict with her own soul. She had seen mighty nations perish, this woman who seemed no older than her five and twenty years. She was brooding upon her beginning, thousands of years back ; and there arose before her vision the threatening form of the magician who had made her immortal. She had been but five and twenty then. He, an evil figure, bent like a chattering ape, his hair matted with filth and dirt, had had his will of her. At parting he had said, his evil eyes upon her and his vile jaws gibbering : “ If thou lovest a man and thou hast given him thine all, and at the break of day thou hast not sucked his life’s blood from him, thou shalt die.” . . . And down all these long centuries she had lived on rich warm blood ; every daybreak that dawned upon her love had seen a white body lying with a red mark upon the throat, a body whiter than ivory.

She sighed through parched, pallid lips, and her handsome brows were knit upon a haunting perplexity. Life was weary ; but Death with its million fears born out of many systems of philosophy was too terrible. And yet she longed for Oblivion to ease the hideous load of centuries. More than once she had loved a youth passionately ; and when, at the warning of cock-crow of the coming of a new

day, she had had to glut upon the youth's blood with dread incantations, her punishment and torment had been almost too terrible to endure at the price of life for another day. But all, all had brought her agony, as they passed one after another in an endless chain, in profound sleep, across the vast emptiness of the dawn, whilst she sat alone with a void in her heart and torn by exquisite pain. She had suffered most—she had remained. . . .

And now had come this beautiful youth, and she loved him.

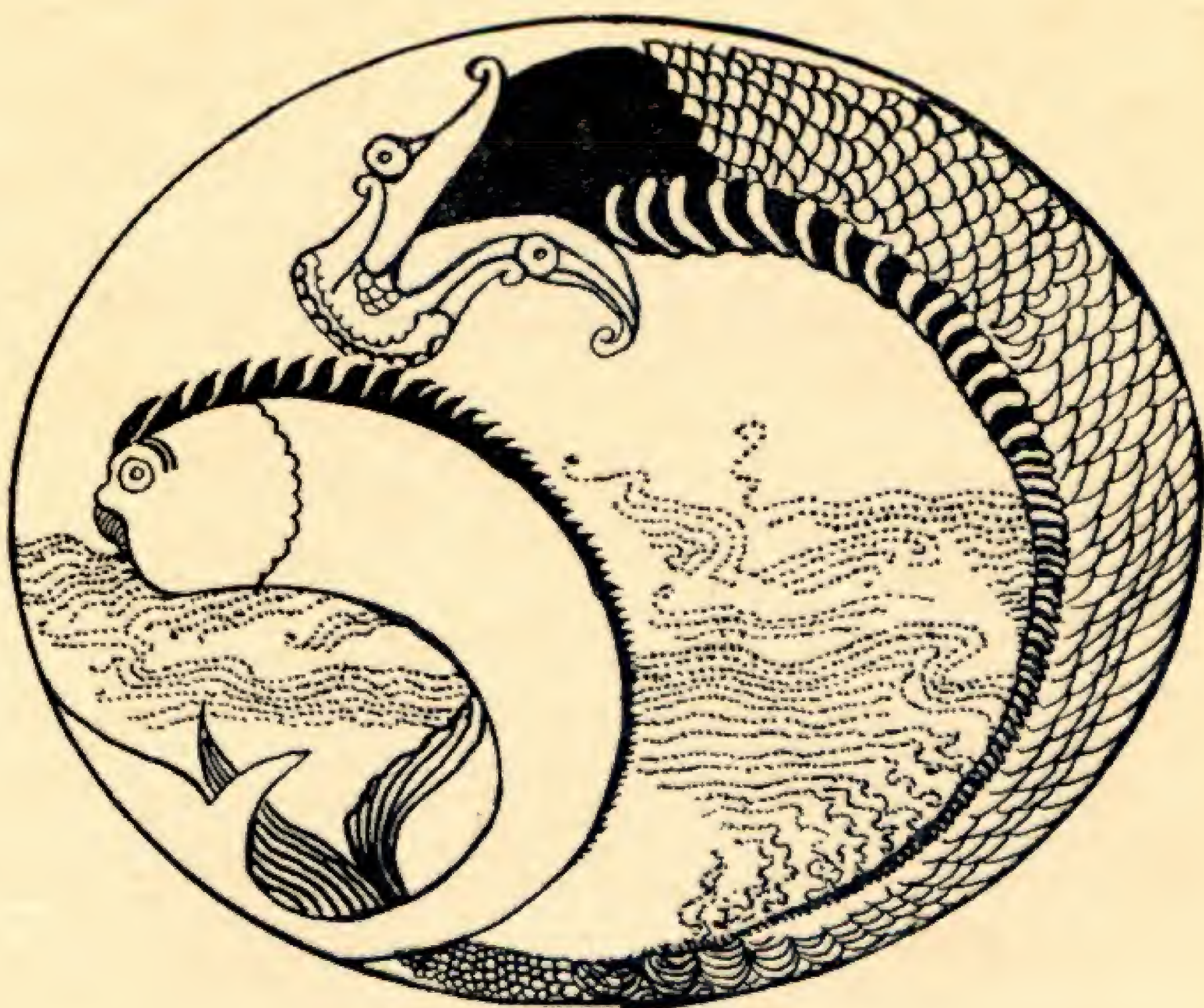
But the lamps were beginning to pale.

She nestled her warm body close to him and leaned towards him, seeking his throat, but paused, shivering, for she caught her name fondly murmured. She heard the cock crow from the garden of the Vestal Virgins. She crept stealthily from the bed and from the room out into the paling purple of the departing night; she gazed down upon the sleeping riot of the dead debauch and felt the fresh dews upon her flesh. Tormented with indecision, her fingers buried deep into her bosom, tearing the rose-leaf skin, she stood there fearing Death who longed for Death, whilst the sapphire of the east flickered with glints of gold and grey.

She roused and sped swiftly back to the room again. The yellow lights of the lamps were paling to lemon hue. With her face averted from the sleeping youth, she began her incantations. Cold perspiration bedewed her brow. It was a race with Time. With skilled rapidity she repeated the well-known formula which invoked the destructive elements of nature. In the garden without the birds were

beginning to sing. But a verse of the incantations remained to be sung, and she would be saved. In her haste she stumbled over a word, and though she essayed it many times it did not come, and she sobbed in anguish and misery. In terror over the last words she stretched out her white arm before her against the blue of the east—so had it been ordained that she must strike before she could see the dawn on her arm in the dawn light—and the lamps still prevailed.

A shaft of gold flickered across the paling blue eastern heavens as she sprang to the bed with the silent stealth of a leopard, and nestling close she lay beside the sleeping youth and kissed him on his white throat with the kiss of death.







MOVEMENT 1. In the sable night, the wind-lashed river flashes by a poplar-tree, and the chenar-tree leans with its hands of Fatima leaves deep over the surging roar of its flood. By the carved rock-temple the fir-trees moan; and at the river's edge the rushes cut the wind like pellets slung by a mighty hand.

The river, a vast flood, broken wild from its confining banks, rages sullen and tempest-tossed; it sweeps over the land, heeding neither wood nor stone—sullen and tempest-tossed.

MOVEMENT 2. From the temple a dancing-girl comes with tinkling little golden bells on her slender anklets and little golden bells that tremble in her coil of purple-black hair. The dancing-girl walks to the tempest-lashed river and seats herself beneath a *lal moher* tree. All shorn and shaken is the *lal moher* tree; and the ground beneath is strewn with its leaves like a moving carpet of

coral-red silk wrought with Kufic medallions of deep gold.

The dancing-girl holds out her arms to the river: "I had existed many years but never lived until fifteen nights gone by. I had lived fifteen years, but my fifteen years were not as the fifteen days of days. My life has opened as a butterfly spreads wing, shedding the grey husk of the chrysalis, flashing its thousand rays of opal hue; my life is on its rainbow flight, floating in azure air, sipping the honey'd goblet of every bloom. And as the butterfly lives a day to know love, so a lovely boy came to me in the summer moon under the lal moher tree. As I lie in his arms and he strains me in his embrace—I close my eyes in ecstasy of the passing moments. When weary with loving, I sing and I dance to him under the lal moher tree. He swims every night to me under the lal moher tree through the swift flood of the river; his beautiful body comes to me cool and calm, but the touch of my hands and the kiss of my mouth set his soul afire. . . . Fifteen nights of life! and to-night the moon is up, and the moon smiles, and the dark night draws to the dawn, but my beloved is not come! And thou, pale moon, dost shine on in hateful unconcern. Thou poor fool! they call thee chaste. Hadst thou but known my love thy colour would be crimson as roses, not coldly pale as chill silver, poor virgin moon!"

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The sable night draws to a close. The satin flowers of the lal moher give forth a death-like, sweet, sickening scent that dazes the brain. The lal moher trees are all

shedding their blooms upon the wind-lashed waters—floating death's heads, covered with gore. The dancing-girl shrinks back from the sign.

* * *

A lovely boy lies dead beneath the lal moher tree, wet from the river's flood—beneath the lal moher tree that swings and wails, all tempest-tossed.







HE loveliest of beings at the Palais Royal was Ninon Sylvietta. She was the exquisite priestess of that oldest of all cults that is ever new—the traffic in pleasure that is played for profit. She was the queen who gave passports to the short-lived world of frantic sin amongst rose-petals and perfumes and dim lights and forbidden ecstasies.

When a kind and considerate parent had, for the good of his son, and, incidentally, the benefit of the Jews, removed his industrious soul to another world, the young lordling had filled the dainty slippers of Ninon with champagne, drinking to the lobe of her ears, to her pink finger-tips, to her pet ape, or to any other thing or parts as his untrammelled wit might suggest. Ninon had spent her life in studying apes, which, very naturally, led her to understand men. She had early come to the conclusion that men only differed from monkeys in that they ate without hunger, drank without thirst, desired everything without reason, and kissed the supreme kiss at

all times. Her body, like her mind, was plastic to all men and moods. She would say that "The only advantage of being a woman is that one could sell oneself to the highest bidder for the night." Her tastes were so refined that æsthetics were the only means of resting her jaded energy. She mocked at everything in life except beauty. Once she had pressed a rainbow-coloured parrot to her breast with all the pent-up feelings of a mother for her first-born child; Ninon's ivory flesh had been torn and scratched, but she vowed that the beauty of the bird had compensated for the wounds. At another time she had forsaken a prince to follow an Adonis labourer of the fields, and had lived a night with him under the rays of the harvest moon. Her rude Adonis had taken her jewels, become grossly drunk, and beaten her almost to death, but that one night of wondrous madness had been balm enough to her pain.

She loved silk. After a night of debauch she would lie, whitely glimmering, in the gloom of her room, caressing and joying in the caress of the clinging silk. She loved the cool touch of the woven gauze, and would bathe her slim white body in the silken sea that breathed some ethereal perfume, fragrant as of sweet forbidden things. It was in such moods of æsthetic ecstasy that there would come upon her the craving for an ideal one; so that often pearl-drop tears would start trickling down her smooth cheeks and a sob would catch at the white column of her entrancing throat. The more hopeless she found her search for the ideal one the more poignant became her hate for all other men. She wished for one who was passionate as an Arab, beautiful as a Greek god, who would understand

her without language, and love her without fear or hate. She sought for a fire which would neither scorch nor burn.

There came a day when in its crimson dusk she met one who was to love her curiously and well. He was passionate without violence, loved her without hate. When he had spent his all and had seen the ardour of her love burning down as does a camp fire at break of day, glowing, then flickering out, he had left her without a taunt, but with a tear. . . .

He had written for her a mime-play, this ideal one for this actress courtesan, and it had lain ever since in her desk of buhl and tortoiseshell. It was written for a man and a maid, and it ranged the wide gamut of passion through a sequence of dances. It was the finding of love in passion and desire and suffering and longing and hate. It had lain in her desk during her long search in vain to find again this ideal man; and the vainness of her search and the pent-up longing of her love had made her the more bitterly hate all men.

Years afterwards she drew the play from its hiding-place, saying: "My search has been in vain; but if I dance that dance of all the passions perchance . . ."

A sudden thought came to her: "If there come a man to me on the first night of the play and he dance this dance with me (but many a man will come), and if such a man come and he be the one for whom I have longed in vain he will dance as only love can dance; and I will give myself to him, all that is left of me, my intense love that even vice could not cool." The cruelty of woman

peeped out as she added: "If he be not the ideal one he shall slay himself that night for me. . . ."

The day of the play drew nearer and nearer, and admission to the theatre was sold for fabulous sums. In the streets they said the King would dance with Ninon, then they said the Dauphin—a thousand names flew on the wings of gossip.

In the great theatre hundreds of hoarse voices shouted applause and endearing words to Ninon where she danced. She had just danced her dance of the beauty of the body. It was a dance of exquisite sensuality. Almost nude, like a statuette carved in ivory, Ninon moved, a fairy queen, under the scintillation of the massive chandeliers that hung suspended above her. Before the vast gloom of the theatre, lime-lit, she shimmered radiant as a jewel.

And as she set the mask upon her face to dance the dance of the Forbidden Tree, and the violins and 'cellos set her feet a-tripping, there leaped upon the stage before her a masked figure, that joined her in her dancing.

She danced with the masked one. She danced at first shyly, with all her art of coquetry. She played to the vast crowd in the gloom before her as she had always done. The faces in the audience were all familiar to her and she danced to them more than to him. Her dance done, the masked man began his rhythmic message to her, where she leaned resting and still against a carved marble pillar with all the calculated abandon of her studied grace. But the ardour of his dancing gradually took possession

of her senses, and she quivered under a gust of passion's fire. The sea of gazing faces vanished into the darkness; she saw now only a masked figure pouring out the reckless confession of his pent-up love in rhythmic movements. His message fascinated her whole being as the music of the charmer's reed-pipes compels the shy snake from the jungle grass. His yearning touched chords long stilled in her heart and set them singing to a new-born song. His overwhelming passion burnt and purified her, as kiln fire separates the golden ore from the vile clay. She forgot that she played a part in a mimic show and joined him in the dance of love; they were as much alone as if on some barren shore, where the rules of the world have no meaning or sway. She danced with him in caressing rhythm, quivering, like a butterfly over a lily bloom.

She pressed him and she leaped from him, tantalising and playing with her wondrous bliss, half-shyly, half-fondly, not quite sure of her possession yet. Her heart was frantic with joy; it seemed the very gift of the gods. Their passion floated out over the violins and moved the gazing throng, and the little world breathlessly watched the strange duel. . . .

With a tired sigh she sank to her knees; she stretched out her white arms and drew him to her. He stooped and kissed her a passionate kiss; but even as they kissed he fell—he fell at her knees, and where he fell he lay and sighed and a profound stillness came upon him.

She was filled with an icy fear. She plucked the mask from his white face, and she saw that it was the

face of the ideal one, and that her ideal lay dead at her feet—the man who had loved her curiously and well.







T was in ancient India. A maiden of a noble house held high festival to choose for herself a husband—as the antique custom was, crowning the man of her choice with a garland of roses.

There had thronged to the choosing many suitors, drawn by her reputed looks and the music of the numbering of her gold and herds—her rich suitors, attended by their splendid retinues, made a fine array.

But amongst her servants there came and sat a young Brahmin—sat with tears in his heart. He was there unrecognised; for it galled this noblewoman's pride to greet amongst such gallant company a youth who lived on alms.

And a court crier arose and stood forth and cried out to the suitors: “Whosoever would wear the garland of roses

of our noble lady must first bring the head of the wild bull that roameth in her father's fields."

And they arose and departed in state ; and many tried but few came back, and of these but one with what they had gone forth to seek—and he was a young Rajput warrior.

And when they were gathered together again for the choosing the court crier again stood forth and cried out : " Whosoever would wear the garland of roses of our noble lady must first bring the head of the Hastinapura bandit chief."

And again they all arose and departed in splendid cavalcade ; and went forth to fulfil her will. But of the many who tried, some left their own heads to adorn the gates of the stronghold of the Hastinapura bandit chief ; but the Rajput warrior, young and bold, brought the chieftain's head and flung it at the lady's feet.

And when the suitors were gathered together again for the choosing the court crier, as before, stood forth and cried out : " This her ring will I throw high up into the air, and whosoever would wear the garland of roses of our noble lady must first shoot his arrow through it."

The suitors bent their bows and let fly the arrows feathered each with the colours of his house, and the marked arrow of the young Rajput warrior lay clasped in its coil.

The maiden smiled well-pleasedly, for the Rajput was a vigorous youth. But still there was no crowning with the garland of roses.

And the Brahmin, seeing her smile, said : " A woman's ideal is the vigorous body at the Feast of Love."

That night at a great banquet the Brahmin arose and

asked the young Rajput warrior: "O noble victor! what is that which hath a thousand blind eyes; which ever questioneth but never listeneth; which hath more poison in its sweetness than all the nagas of the underworld; which can wear down a thousand warriors, yet know not even weariness? Thou, victor Rajput, answer me."

The young Rajput warrior felt his prize slipping away; he was not gifted with skill of brain for riddles of life. He was on the point of departing when a mischievous page whispered in his ear. With a clear voice he said: "The answer to thy riddle, sir priest, is Woman."

The Brahmin bowed his head and arose and went forth into the night with his begging-bowl. . . .

The next morning at the sun's rising the suitors with their peacock retinues rode forth on their prancing steeds; and last of all came the young Rajput warrior, unattended, on a sorry nag—and as he passed beneath the balcony a crown of roses fell upon his head.

* * *

The years passed. The Rajput warrior and his bride stood facing starvation and ruin.

She said: "You have wasted my riches and have brought us shame."

He struck her on the mouth and the blood flowed.

She caught the hand that had struck her and kissed it.

"Oh! my love," she said, "let my riches go; let us start again a new life together in another land." . . .

* * *

For a time the warrior dragged her patiently in his train; then came blows. Then he left her in the streets of

a great city. In tattered rags and weary, chased by dogs and pestered by little urchins, she was found by the Brahmin in the streets of the great city that reeked with riches. He gave her half his alms and took her to his home. And he worked for her from morning till night to buy her raiment and the luxuries so dear to her little soul. But he touched her not, for his love of old.

One day she went away with his little hoard to succour her Rajput warrior who had passed her door.

And the Brahmin said: "In the battle of life it is the athlete that wins a woman."

* * *

The warrior loved her well again for many a month—she had money. And with her came strange change. Fortune smiled on him and he came to stand amongst the mighty ones of the world. He now found her to be growing old and lean and haggish, and he set his wild dogs upon her and drove her from him.

The woman returned weary and forsaken to the Brahmin, and the Brahmin took her in without a word. But he touched her not, for his love of old.

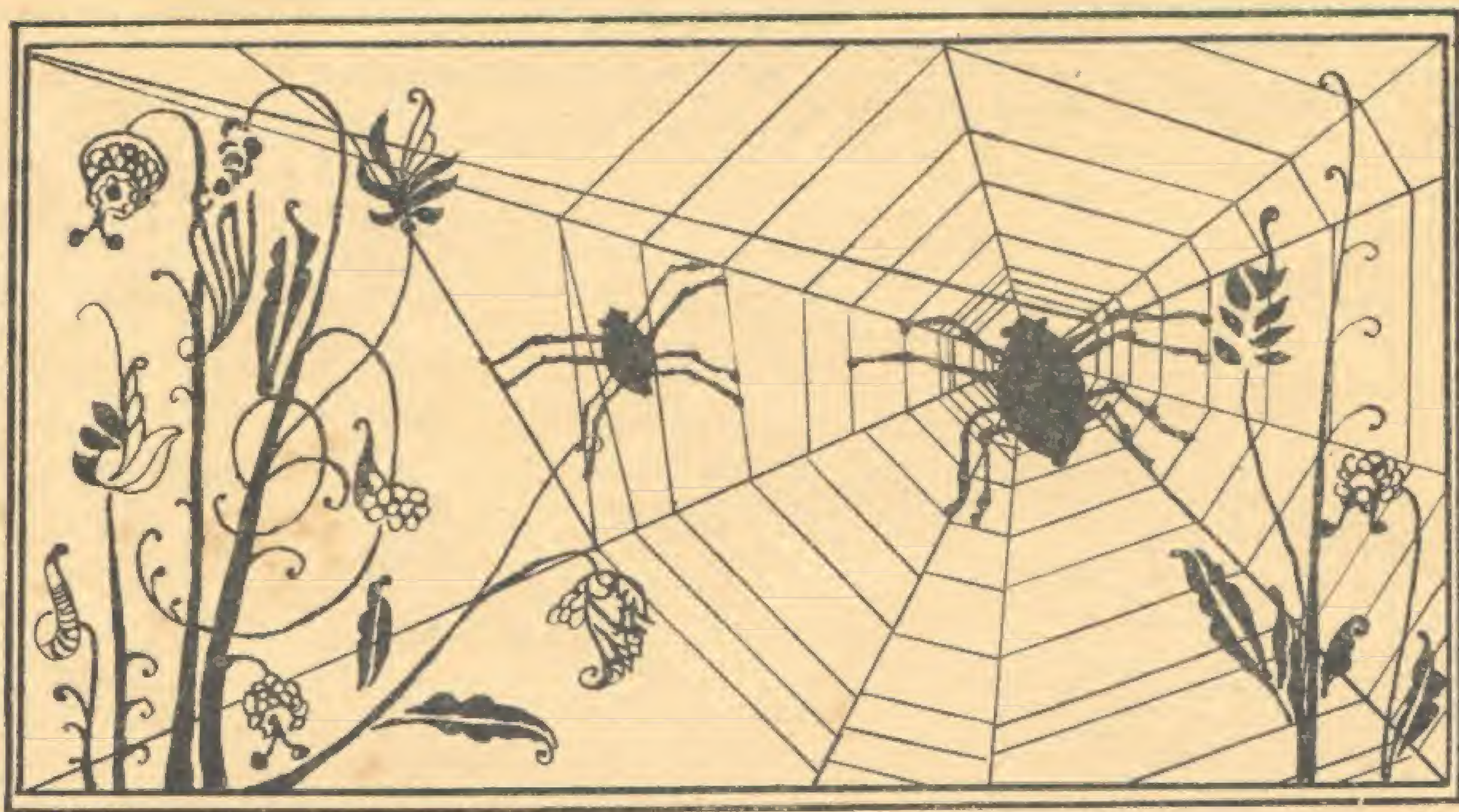
* * *

Five years passed; the Brahmin grew rich and great; and he gave her all that her soul desired—fine raiment, and jewels, and ease of days.

But she knew not gratitude and she loved him not. One night, with her Rajput warrior's men, she robbed him of all he had, took his gold and silver, and left him a beggar again. And with her warrior mate she lived in great splendour, reckless of blows, until there came a day when,

drunk with wine, he asked her for more gold—and she showed him her empty purse. He arose in wrath and struck her down, leaving her with his jewelled dagger in her breast; and departed from thence. His serving-men came and took away her poor body, stripped of all its fineries, and threw her upon the village refuse-heap; and there the Brahmin, ever wandering, found her by the light of the pale moon.

The Brahmin wept a lament over her. He took off his only garment that saved him from the bitter winds of the chilly night, and covered her shame. Too weary and worn to dig a grave, he lay by her side. He lay by her in death.







ONCE there lived a man and a woman who came out of England to India in the glory of their youth. They called her Inez the beautiful, and the man—the man did not count.

Beneath a wide-spreading sycamore-tree they lay, in long chairs, this man and woman, upon the green velvet of the grassy lawn, almost too idle to think their thoughts. In the old-world garden there fell a cascade rich with the musk of the yellow rose it had gathered in its flight. Around and about, languorous swarms of insects droned their weird music. Eyelids were heavy between day-dreaming and slumber.

Suddenly she spoke: "Nothing ever happens here. India is dead!"

He roused a little, and answered: "Why should anything happen?"

She laughed dryly: "The wondrous East! Does the wondrous East go dumb and shrink wherever a Government official treads?"

He turned lazily, yawned, and said: "I don't know." And again he asked, puzzled: "Why should things happen?"

She gave a laugh of sorrowful contempt, and then she said, as though speaking to herself: "Palaces and jewels,

lackeys in powder and ruffs; pearls and receptions, silver-studded horses, sables and silken robes; little mean kisses! . . . Oh, thou dying soul of India, save me!"

The man smiled an indulgent smile from the lofty pedestal of a husband's superiority. She glanced at her lord through the corners of half-closed eyes—the piercing glance of criticism.

And as she weighed his soul, the midday silence fell upon the drowsy world.

The woodpecker stilled its gurgling cry and the cuckoo ceased to mock its own echo. The great red grasshoppers ended their noonday hymn. The very trees hesitated to rustle in the fierce furnace of high noon. . . .

It came faintly, faintly, like the sobbing of a nightingale. It came nearer and nearer, stealthily, as the incoming tide brings the murmur of the rising waters to the seashore. It came like the longing of an exquisite sin. Through the silver birches it came winding its way, rising and falling, the song of a magic lute, as a dying bird cries softly to her mate to come to her side; so the strange haunting music came.

The dead leaves rustled; the twigs parted; and there entered upon the grass a polished statue of bronze. The light gleamed upon his supple muscles. A silken loin-cloth of the hue of wild berries was about him, and a huge python of gold shimmered as it wound its death-dealing coils about his throat. He came there playing upon a carved lute of ebony inlaid with silver. The girl half rose from her chair, her lips white and parted. He paused a moment before her, stooped, and gazed into her eyes. The music, soft and pleading, moved the echoes of smouldering desires; it rose and it

fell and it whispered of the forbidden ecstasies that bring wondrous madness under Indian moon-lit nights.

And he passed on.

That night she tossed and tumbled on an uneasy bed. She brooded on many things; she was haunted by things that scorched and burned as she tossed and tumbled on her weary bed. The wind moaned and the jackals howled through the throbbing air. A nightingale poured forth its wondrous song, as she lay gently sobbing. And as she lay dozing, weary and worn, again that music came out of the sable night. She listened intently. The lute was pleading tenderly and she knew the words it said. She understood its very lightest suggestion, sweet and tender. The music paused at her door in softly murmuring melody.

From the couch hard by came the heavy breathing of her sleeping lord. She leaped from her bed and stepped forth out of the tent.

In the full light of the moon he stood, this beautiful bronze god of song. And there hung from his shoulders, behind him, the white skin of a snow-leopard.

“What wouldst thou have of me?” she asked, hushed and low.

He answered: “If thou knowest not, then I will not tell thee,” and he made as though to go.

She put out her hands.

“I will go with thee,” she said—“but I will bring my jewels.”

He smiled and shook his head. “Wouldst thou take *his* goods?” he asked, and he came close to her. “Come,” he whispered, “come as thou art, but stripped of every shred

of all that thou hast had from this other. Thou hast called unto me, and I have come at thy call."

She undid the night-apparel that she wore, and as the silken folds fell to the ground she stepped forth before him : and he put his arms about her and kissed her upon the mouth.

And when he had wrapped the skin of the snow-leopard about her, they went forth into the night, silently as a panther moves amongst the sandalwood—out into the perfumed night, into another world.







I WALKED once through the streets of Woe.
 No lamps were lit, but the moon shone
 brightly, as a mosque lamp, hanging from
 the silent dome of heaven ; it shone with all
 its splendour upon the faithful and the un-
 faithful alike. The mighty mosque-dome of
 the high heavens glowed shimmering with
 many points of light, so distant and uncon-
 cerned with the faithful and unfaithful that I turned away
 in loathing : “ What doth it matter to thee, O mighty dome
 of the mosque of Life ! the prayers of thy worshippers ?
 What doth it matter to thee, thou mighty inverted cup of
 wine, how thou dost fling these drops of sour-sweet wine
 called human souls into the thirsty sands of Nothing ?

What doth it matter to thee that art as silent as the Sphinx ?”

I wandered through the streets of Woe and of a sudden was caught, and held, in the magic net of a music played by a master hand. Through an open window Oriental memories roused by the cunning of a wondrous skill came floating to mine ears, borne lightly as on the wings of purple butterflies. Unannounced I entered the house and sat down. The player went on, unheeding, with her music. She was alone. She was playing the *Sonata Pathétique* of Beethoven; and it seemed as she played that the mighty strain of the torrent of her misery would burst its confining banks of fortitude. . . .

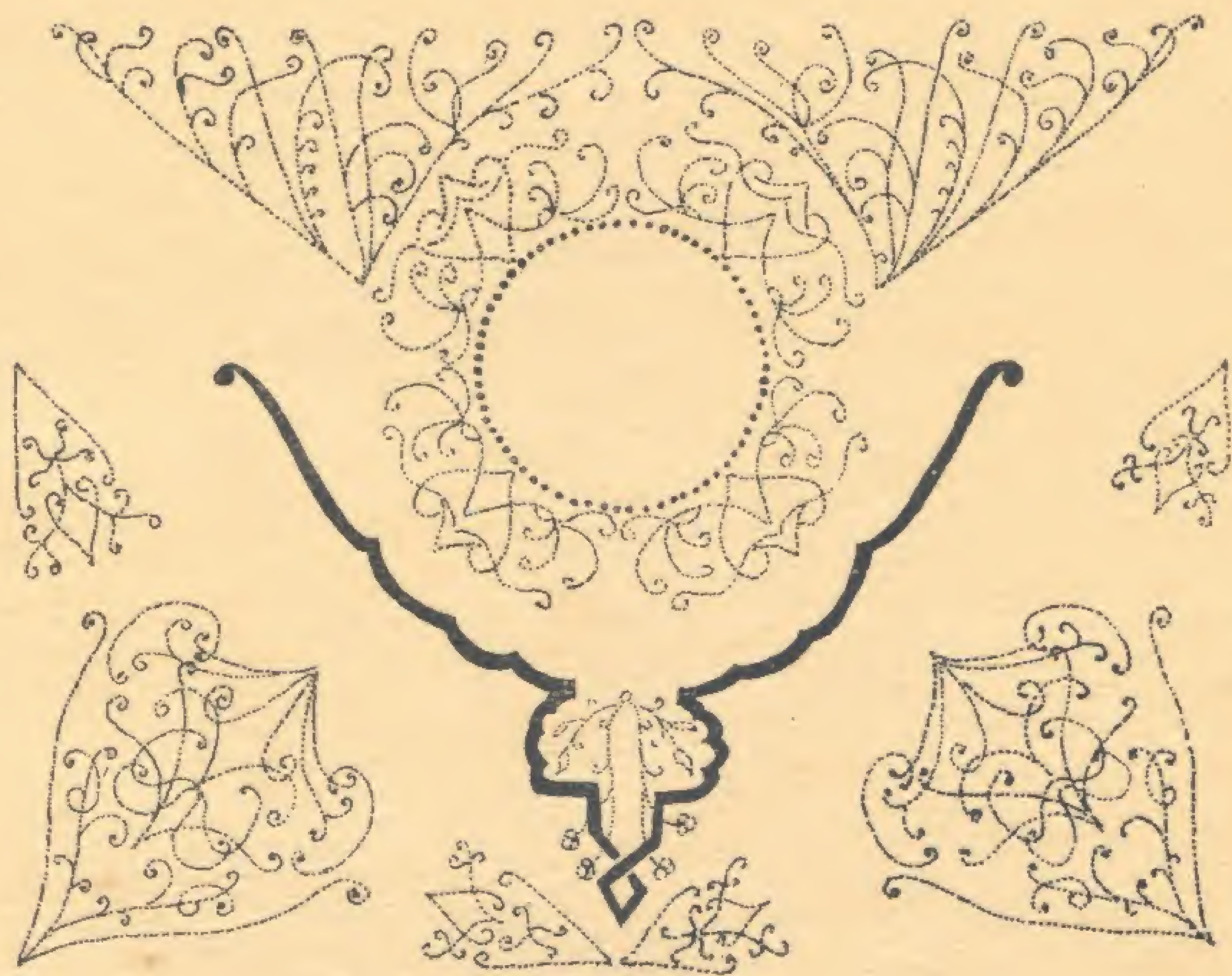
Suddenly she ceased her music and turning a beautiful face, tear-wet, to me she said: “Had you been at my wedding this morning you had seen a virgin in white and apple blossom. Can you imagine what it is to be a girl and to give your maidenhood to one you hate? When the organ pealed the Wedding March I sang under my bated breath the strains of the Marche Funèbre. As I came forth, a young mother in the crowd lifted up her little girl child, and I thought: ‘I will not bear such a child to this man. Better were illegitimate love than a hateful legal wedlock. It is better to have a beloved child of shame than bring forth a loathed being conceived in misery.’”

She turned again to her music, this sad, beautiful woman. The music moaned and sobbed like the moan of Mary beneath the bleeding figure on the cross. Her eyes were fixed, set, death-like, and her face like a white Ionian mask.

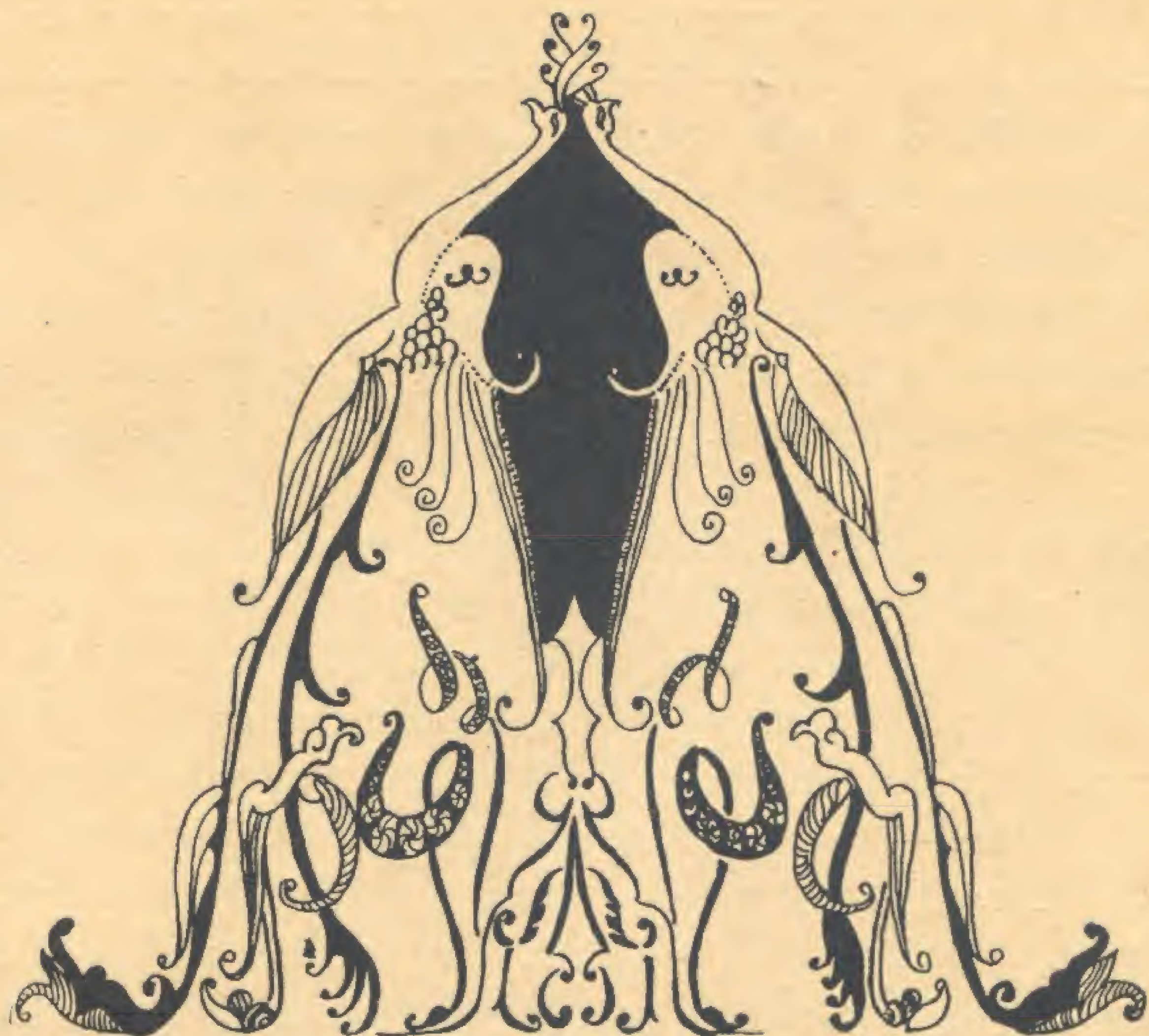
I said: "But you may learn to love him" (that poor lame phrase!).

She arose and opened a door that led to the state banquetting-hall within, and there, sprawling at a table over a wine-stained cloth, his face cut open by a broken glass, lay the bridegroom of the morning, shamelessly drunk.

As I stepped silently from the house, the *Rêverie de Schumann* came sobbing pitiably upon the night air, as if the bride-widow were stretching out her arms to a fugitive phantom in the cave of memory.







AND Salome spoke to John, called the Baptist: "Will thy God warm thee with his promises of chilly bliss as I with my soft, clinging arms?"

"Will thy God caress thee with his kiss of death, as I thy head rocked on my breasts?"

"Will thy God satisfy thee with his empty penances, as I when thou art in my close embrace—when we two are become as one?"

"Why wilt thou not speak unto me? Say me a word; a curse. I would treasure even hard words from thy lips. My mother, the queen, is a harlot, even as thou sayest.

My mother is as the strange women near the temple of Priapus, as they sit on curious carpets, naked, for the passers-by.

“My father, the king, is as the mountain goat, even as thou sayest. He longeth for my perfumed limbs. He longeth — ay, perchance, even as I long for thee, thou golden god of Israel.

“My people are as the village swine, even as thou sayest, wallowing in filth and sin. Ay, even as thou sayest.

“But I—I am a virgin waiting but for thee. When I am awakened at night, lulled by pleasing dreams, I put forth my arms to lift up thine head to kiss thy red, cold lips, only to find—to find—darkness and a void. And then I hate thee. I hate thee. I hate thee. I cry and moan with my yearning for thee. And my eunuchs and women, they crowd in to me. I would even behead thee, so that, if it be only in death, I may kiss thy marble lips—lips that can be no more cold in death than in life. . . .

“I saw thee when thou didst first come to my father’s court, dust-covered like the shepherds from the hills; and I said: ‘If I might wash his golden feet and dry them with my hair.’ The lion-skin slipped from off thy shoulder and left thy breast bare, and I said: ‘If I could kiss thy beautiful body.’ I longed to stroke thee with my jewelled hand.” . . .

* * *

Upon that night Salome was called to dance before her father, Herod the king. And Herod said: “Salome, dance to me thy Dance of Desire.”

Now Salome the daughter of Herod wore her gown of seven veils, and the outer veil was of purple tissue wrought

cunningly with rows of pearls and uncut amethysts and sapphires and moonstones. And when she had cast from her the last of her seven veils in her dancing, and stood before Herod unarrayed, Herod held out his sceptre and she set her jewelled fingers upon it; and the king drank in her beauty, and he cried in his desire that he would give half his kingdom for her.

But Salome shook her head, and thrust the sceptre from her; and the king said: "I will pay thy price."

And Salome named her price.

That night she kissed the dead lips of the head of John, called the Baptist, and they were as cold as in life.







HE dying priest lay motionless, reclining against a vast banyan-tree. His lips were thin-drawn and his skin hung loose in many folds upon the emaciated body. A great peace had settled on his troubled soul. His eyes shone, but his breath came slow. The wind shook the tree-top and he felt it shiver down its mighty trunk. He smiled and murmured : “Even thou too, great monarch of the jungle, with thy weight of a thousand elephants, thou, O banyan,

must shiver from a passing breeze that leaves a little child untouched. Strange are thy ways, O all-embracing Shiva !”

The sun rose higher and higher; the hour arrived for the pealing of the temple bell that brings the worshippers together; and the old priest had never failed to toll the bell that reminded the unmindful of their duty to their gods. He strove to rise and toll the massive bell the sound of which was like the roaring of the wild bull; but with a sigh he fell back wearily beneath the tree. The sun rose higher and higher and the shadows of the pillars of sculptured stone shrank ever smaller. Again he essayed to rise, but fell back weaker than before.

The shadows disappeared—the sun was at his zenith in the sky when pillars cease to cast shadows. It was the moment of his duty to his God; suddenly the great bell tolled, untouched by any hand. “The great God can fulfil his own ordering,” murmured the old priest, and lay content.

Straightway the hill-side was peopled with women in varied bright hues, like a rainbow broken by a giant hand to form streaks of coloured light. They found him lying there; as they knelt beside him, one took his weary old head upon her lap, and as he gazed into the void they heard him murmur: “The sin is atoned, O Shiva! and from the cycle of births I am free.” And faintly, as he went into eternity, he told them the tale of his sin in a former birth.

* * *

Once there lived a youth who was a flower-seller by the temple of Kali at Anandnath in Kashmir. The fame of the

beauty of the youth was so spread about that every morning the younger women all flocked to his stall, so that the temple became uncared for and deserted.

He sat behind a window of ivory most cunningly carved, selling his flowers—sweet-scented flowers. And the women came and bought his chains of moghras just to hear the music of his voice as he named the price. He had white water-lilies for the childless women as offering to the goddess : crimson *lal mohers* for the death of a relative or an enemy, sweet with perfume : tuberose for the tender maid, weeping for the return of some faithless *Sailanee* : roses—pink, white, yellow, gold—for the heart-felt thank-offering of an erstwhile sorrowing dame. The round ivory pillars of his flower-stall were not more white than his round throat. Often would young brides come to the temple decked in flowers and precious stones to catch his passing glance, only to depart with many a pang that the young seller of flowers would not teach them the mysteries of Love.

Sometimes the wild mountaineers would come in pilgrimage bringing their own wild flowers—flowers as rude and ugly as themselves. They would stand agape in wonder at his fairness.

The seller of flowers wore a great mirror-ring upon his thumb, as the dancing-girls wear their thumb-rings of gold and precious stones ; and gazing into it often he would sigh at his own beauty. “O that I had a fitting maid to perpetuate my loveliness !”

At last there came a maid to him and he grew to love her ; for he laughed and talked and did other things to the other girls only when she was not near. He would take his

brightest flowers and sit on her steps, thrumming his lute, waiting patiently until she came forth. And the women whom he had laughed to scorn now mocked him.

The beautiful maid married him, as she had always intended to do, but with a stipulation. He struggled hard against it, but she had her way—which is the woman's way.

On the night of their oneness they stole to the temple, moving silently, as glow-worms glide through the still air. She led and he followed—the seeing following the blind—nervous, uneasy. A pariah dog came stumbling against them; the woman kicked the howling beast aside.

The temple was deserted, except where in the round domed room lay the dread goddess in black marble and gold. The copper lamp that hung from the domed ceiling threw mystic rays in the gloom that made the marble, polished by the kisses of many million men, glint like the burnished steel of swords.

The young man made a last appeal: "Oh! be warned in time," he said; "the vengeance of the Mother will be terrible."

But the woman laughed gaily, and answered: "What! Dost thou take back thine oath now?" Her voice was tinged with contempt. "A man's promises are like his pre-wedded words. Thou must love me as thy mate before the great Mother."

She lay down on the ground, fair as a silk-moth. She pulled him down to her, and he did what she bade him do.

Then, the great goddess laughed.

The laughter rang round the vaulted roof, rolling and rumbling as falling trees thunder down a rock-strewn precipice. It rang loud and long, until suddenly a mighty gust of wind blew out the pale light and left the temple in utter darkness.

They fled from the place and apart from each other, each their several ways into the night.

At break of day she found herself outside the temple door, in her hand a tufted javelin. The stern message and the laughter of the goddess came back to her ears. She trembled and fell down afeared, but unseen hands raised her and impelled her feet. The words of the goddess came back to her: "Thou shalt laugh as thou strikest, and shalt sing to his death agony."

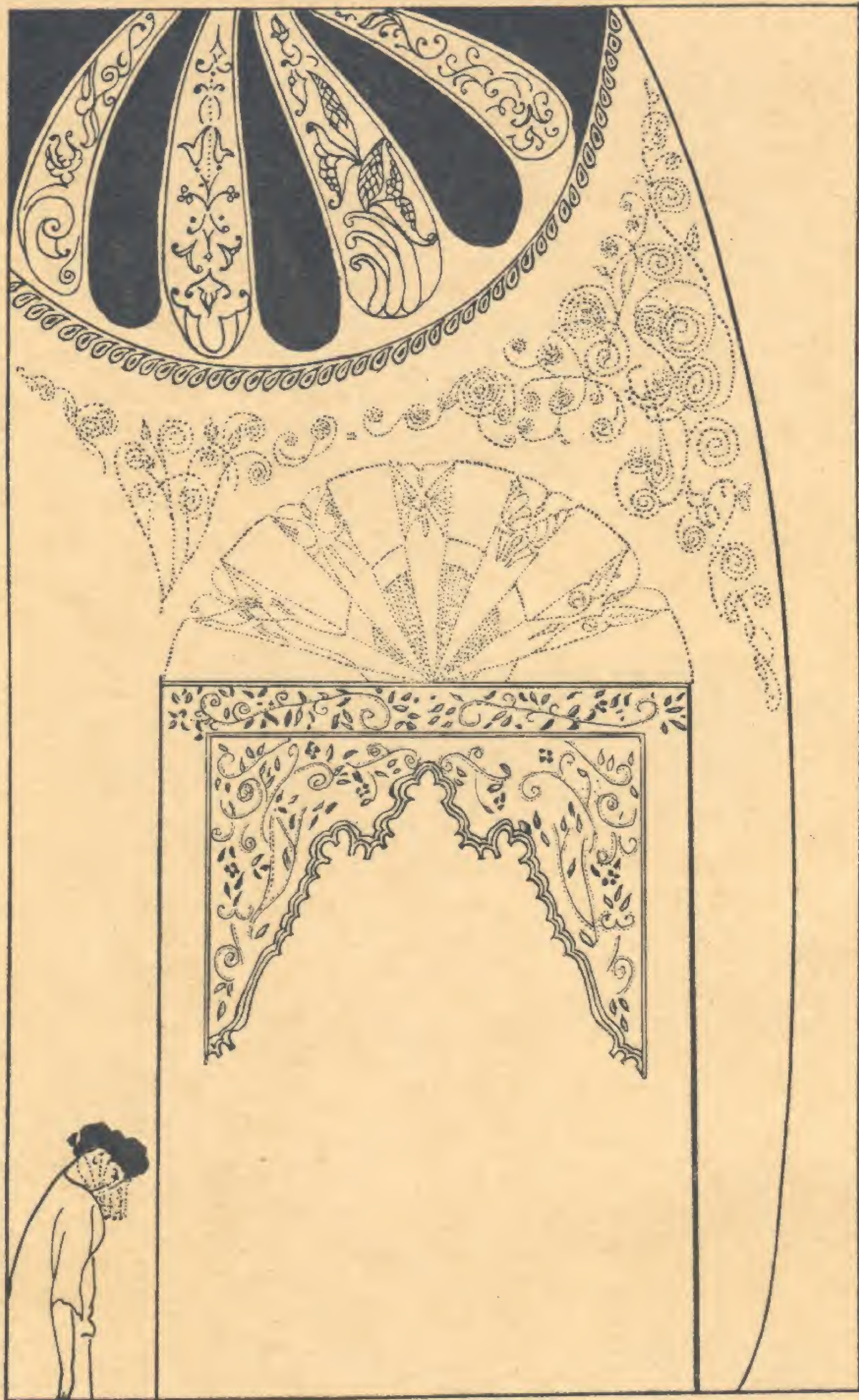
He sought her all through the night. His love did not desire to rebuke her; he but felt a great pity for her fright and plight. As the sun touched the dome of the temple with his golden light, he found her. With a cry of joy he ran to her. She raised her hand, the javelin firmly poised, and aimed at a bird that trilled upon a bough above his head, and flung the long shaft. The tufted javelin, with hidden force, came straight to him and struck him above the heart.

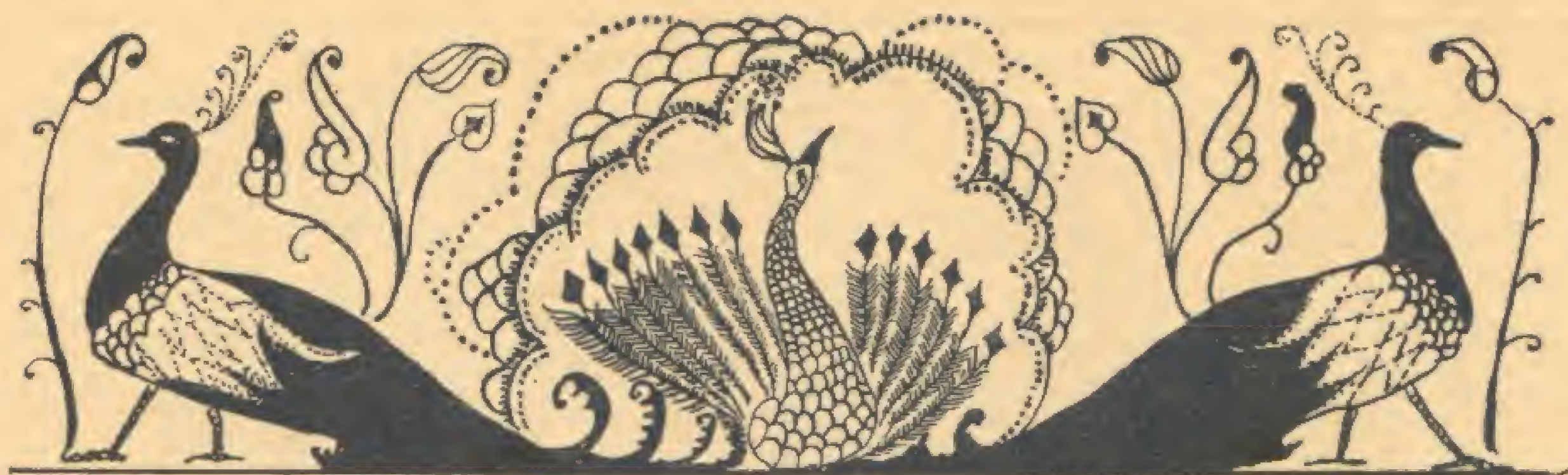
As his life blood flowed out she danced and sang round his prostrate body. He tried to rise and hold her in a last embrace. He fell; and as the blood trickled from his mouth he cast a last haunting glance upon her in her cruelty.

That day a priest found within the domed room of the temple what seemed a statue of a woman with the face of

Prema ; and he heard as in a dream the great goddess say :
“She shall suffer all earthly wants and desires in a house
of cold, unfeeling clay—she shall be a sentient soul in a
dead body—until the man, in another birth, shall redeem
them both.”







HE awoke from a sleep that left him more weary than when he had first closed his eyes. His half-awakened consciousness suggested to him a story of disagreeable importance; and he kept his body inert, the better to stimulate his questioning mind. Gradually his thoughts came out bright as steel from a forger's bath; but no longer could he keep his body motionless—his aching limbs rebelled against the tyranny of his will that they should be still. He began to move to seek relief, but his throbbing temples now took up their tale of woe.

In desperation he left his Empire bed of ebony and gold: the carven fantastic naiads that held up the curtains grimaced at him, and he shook his fist at them: "Even they too seek to mock me," he groaned. The very fabric of his silken night attire seemed to fret his soul, and he shed it from his plagued body.

The gilt clock chimed six of the evening as he descended the steps of a Roman bath, its marble carved with a Bacchanalian dance. His eyes fell on its laughing satyrs and he turned away fretfully. The pleasant water caressed his body with warm palpitating curves, and refreshed his limbs. Rising from the perfumed waters he sank with a

sigh of rest on the silken cushions of a marble couch. The warm air that fanned the place quickly dried him, whilst a beautiful woman entered and massaged him with plastic fingers steeped in a subtle scent. His pains left him, but a curious lethargy took their place to torture the awakened mind as he dressed himself in fine raiment. He went to a ruby-lacquered cabinet of fourteenth-century workmanship and touched a secret spring. From the recess that yawned he took out a curiously shaped phial of jade filled with a heavy liquid. As he held it in his hand absently, his eyes roamed over the lacquered song of the cabinet. It told the Passion of Poet Buddha, and he read in Chinese signs the simple lines in old gold :

Peace for the brute in rest :

Peace for the water in rest :

But only peace for man in death.

In his lethargic way he put the phial in his pocket. A corner of a grey envelope, that peeped from a little drawer, caught his eye ; he pulled the envelope out. Slowly he sank down on a silk Persian saddle-bag and read the epistle through, but it held no meaning for his mind ; he read it again, tracing the words with his nervous fingers :

“ My life was a mirage in a barren desert which the illumining light of thy love dispelled.” He uttered a mocking laugh. He seemed to find a pleasurable pain in the phrase penned by this feminine hand ; he repeated it again and again, playing upon the gamut of an exquisite torture of his passionâte soul.

The clock struck ten as he left the house. As he threaded his way through the jostling throng he heard the

newsboys crying the latest news. “Whether one know a little more or a little less, what does it matter?” he said to himself—“Death reaches the ignorant and the master alike.” The patter-patter of the passers-by seemed to him but to beat the tune to the sentence of that letter. With an angry gesture he tried to dissociate his mind from the haunting torture. An old man was playing a plaintive tune on a violin, and again the refrain was transformed into the tune of the words that burned him. He stood before the old musician and growled at him, his eyes blazing: “Curse you, can’t you play anything else but that lie?”

He walked up Covent Garden and went into the Opera House. It was a dance night. He ordered a bottle of *Louis-Philippe* Cognac, which cost him pounds. It was his favourite liquor and he sipped the first glass with quiet enjoyment, but left the rest of the bottle untouched—to the frantic joy of the waiter.

A woman behind him was speaking; he heard: “My husband goes away to-morrow night and you will come; you will come to me, won’t you? I will bathe myself in your favourite perfume——” He laughed his short laugh and said to himself: “Women are always the first to seduce, either in thoughts or words.”

He saw at a table a drunken Faust measure the bust of a girl with the span of his hand. She gave him a resounding slap. “An honest woman,” he said to himself. The man’s hands were removed from the tantalising roundness of the fair Marguerite and they were full of gold. The honest woman with a cry of joy threw herself into his arms with abandon, and Faust said: “Will you

love me for ever?" And she replied: "Yes—beyond death." He laughed a short laugh like the bark of a dog.

A harlot came and, unasked, tasted the dregs in the brooding sybarite's glass and grimaced at the strangely exquisite taste. She slapped him on the back as she burst into the refrain of a popular song, but he neither moved nor spoke. With a curse she went away. Whereat he said: "Before the passion of death even the passion of woman pales into faint insipidity." He wondered how senseless and void the frantic love of that one woman now seemed to him when he had but an hour or two to live. He thought of his wasted life, but the next moment he smiled as he said: "A life of pleasure is a life well spent," and from the lake of reveries he plucked out pearls of exquisite pleasure and streamers of rank weed.

His pulse was steady and his perception keener than ever. He felt a curious sense of exhilaration as he kept repeating and enumerating with child-like persistency the things he knew; and dwelt upon the one great mystery he would soon solve.

He looked at his jewelled watch and saw that it lacked but five minutes to twelve. He took out his phial of jade and unscrewed the stopper; it held a long thin needle fixed to a bulb. His watch now pointed four minutes to twelve; somehow he liked the figure twelve. Slowly the hands of the watch crept together. He had read somewhere that hours were slow when one was intent on the recording machine of time; but he did not find it so. "Time is as it was before," he said; "the seconds do not seem the longer."

The needle made a little whispering sigh as he thrust it rather deep into a blue vein of his arm. It drew a little blood and he shuddered. There came upon him a curious warm sensation as if something warmer than his own blood were mixing with it. He faintly recalled that the vendor had promised him immunity from pain and he smiled :

“The pain of a century is as the twinge of a minute compared with the painless sleep of Eternity.”

He felt as if his feet no longer existed and the curious feeling mounted steadily up his inert limbs. He smiled a sad, sweet smile.

A dancing couple were moving towards him and he wagered, as with an unseen soul, that they would not reach him before the feeling of obliteration lulled his heart to stillness. They came nearer; the feeling of numbness mounted higher and higher towards his drowsy brain. They were almost upon him—the dancing couple—when the man with her spoke low and the woman replied :

“My life was a mirage in a barren desert which the illumining light of thy love dispelled.”

As the feeling of serene obliteration reached his suffering heart the dying man laughed a laugh of real amusement.







HE trumpets blew a wild blast, and the sound came floating through the ivory windows of the great king's harem.

The slave-girls were astir, flitting listlessly, preparing with sad care for the visits of their lord that so rarely came. At the outer gate were little alcoves of lacquered wood wherein the slave-girls dwelt—that the old king might dally there, on his way to the queen, with girls that took his passing fancy.

As the old king went towards the second gate, beyond

which his wives never passed, he heard the sobbing of an ebony lute, and he stayed his feet by the alcove and went in and sat him down beside the girl and said :

“Sing to me.”

And the girl sang to him :

*“ Oh ! loved one, I have yearned for thy touch and kiss,
and thou hast left me unkissed and cold.*

*Oh ! thou mine only one, I gazed upon thy manhood, and
thou hast made me sightless to all else but memory.*

*Oh ! forgetful one, I am dying of an empty heart and the
crows and vultures are gathering to feast upon me.*

*Oh ! birds of iron beaks, my whole body you may have if
you will leave me but mine eyes ; for perchance the
loved one may come one day.*

Oh ! let mine eyes be.”

And the king said to her : “Ask what thou wouldst of me.”

And she answered : “I crave a boon, O King.”

The king replied : “It is thine—that thy sweet singing may be rid of sadness.”

And the woman said : “Beneath my window there passed a warrior—a young warrior of thy guard. Let me be a slave unto him.”

The king arose in wrath, but the boon could not be gainsaid.

The old king called to the chief eunuch and bade him go forth and bring the young warrior of his guard without the second gate ; and the eunuch brought the youth thereto.

And the king said: "Ye two, I give you the boon the woman craves. The eunuch shall lead the woman forth and take you twain to my summer palace. For two whole years you shall live without sight of any man. For two whole years you shall live as any king or queen, with every luxury that brain of man can plan or idleness devise. And if you two shall still love at the end of the time, well: and if you fail—death."

And the man and the girl both smiled, the superior smile known to lovers.

The garden was beautiful beyond the promise of the king. It swept before the delighted eyes as far as sight could reach, walled in by mighty battlements. The marble palace in its midst thrust its dazzling splendour into the sky, cloud-kissed. And the twain lived there alone.

The first month was a month of bliss.

The second was a month of memories of the first.

The fourth a span of make-belief.

The seventh found them cold and passion-void.

As the year drew out its dragging course they hated more than they had ever loved; so that to avoid each other's company they came to announcing their whereabouts by calling: "Here am I." . . .

The new year's day brought them a return of the first night of bliss, and the man kissed her again with the kiss of passion.

Then a child was born.

The child died; and they would wander together, silent, to sit by the gates—waiting, ever waiting the end and their

punishment. . . . The woman would often hie to the grave of her child ; but the man sat ever by the gate, brooding and silent. He had no further desires for the exquisite things of life, but sat sullen and silent. . . .

At last the gates opened and closed upon the old king, and he stood before the twain.

And they both arose in the presence of the king and said :

“Oh, sire, give us death !”

The old King smiled the wan smile of years and sorrow. “Go each your way,” he said.







HEY say that Mahomed of the house of Ghazni once fell bewitched of a woman of Persia who had fled the conquering Arab barbarians with her mate, a nobleman of the Persian court. And Mahomed longed for her exceedingly.

Thus it befell :

Mahomed, whilst hunting, was seized with a thirst akin to madness and had naught wherewith to slake it, when he espied a spacious garden, a garden beautiful

as a dream. He alighted from his horse in his torture of thirst at the house within the garden, and knocked at a door of beaten silver, on which he read in letters of gold and enamel :

*“ God enters with every guest :
Blessing on him that cometh.”*

As the door opened he signed to the servant that he was too parched to speak, and the servant led him to a seat of honour. He heard faintly the murmur of a beautiful voice, and presently a woman of bewildering charms came to him and handed him a vessel of gold, set about its rim with precious stones, and holding what to him was more precious than rubies—a rose sherbet scented with ambergris; but on it there floated a layer of dust. Thirsty though he was, he therefore took but sips of the draught, blowing away the film of dust from the reach of his lips before he sipped.

Unlike the women of his Arab race, the Zoroastrian woman was uncovered, and her fearless eyes gazed at him steadily.

And when he had quenched his thirst, and his tongue could utter speech, he said : “Thou hast saved my life with thy life-giving draught, though thou hast taken it away with the sabre cuts of thine eyes.”

Her gaze did not waver beneath his sudden hunger for her.

“O stranger,” she said, “I have done naught but my duty. Were my lord, my husband, here, he would have known how to do thee greater honour.”

At the news of a husband he turned peevishly away; and the ignoble soul of the king peeped forth as he said: "Dost thou always sweeten thy drinks with dust?"

"O stranger," she answered him, "I saw thee well-nigh dead of thirst and I remembered that saying of our Zarathustra: 'Water giveth life; but taketh it away when drunk too deep by an over-thirsty man.' Therefore, I put burnt sugar in thy drink that thou mightest mistake it for dust and sip it slowly, and escape the danger."

The king blushed; for he was ashamed—and he thanked her and went away. . . .

* * *

Some days thereafter the king came to the garden again and sought the woman alone, and said: "I am Mahomed of Ghazni who hath given shelter and protection to thy kinsmen and to thee. In my harem there be women, thousands and fair; and thou shalt rule over them all—and me."

The woman of ancient Persia answered and said: "What is thy palace to me or the ruling of thee; thou who canst not even rule thyself? What is thy crown to me? The love of my lord is my most glorious crown. What is thy love to me, thou who art honeycombed with vice? What are thine honours to me, O prince of dishonour? What is greater honour than the honour of a mother, of a wife, and of a loyal friend?"

The king answered: "The lashes of thy disdain are to me as the kisses of my god; but thou canst not escape me.

Call it honour or love or dishonour, as thou wilt, it were all alike to me. In my army are a hundred hundred thousand heads, whilst of thee and thine there are but ten, therefore shall ten heads deck my gates on poles if thou become not queen of my women. Thy husband shall be tortured lying face upward to the burning sun. He shall stare at the sun until he go blind—the eyes that have dared to gaze into thine eyes. He shall be left so until the vermin take him. And thou shalt see him every day.”

The woman neither moaned nor beseeched, but, gazing at him fearlessly, she said: “My house succoured thee in thy need, O bastard prince; but as for me, I had rather that the world had been rid of a hog.”

Red anger mounted to his cheeks, yet he spake not.

But she said: “O king, he who would rule a people must govern by reason: yet thou hast no reason even in thy lusts. One woman is as another woman: what one woman can give thee, another woman can give thee. What thou longest for in me, the women of thy harem can give thee better than I. My grief will not incite thee to amorous flights; only too soon wilt thou weary of the sight of me; but the evil deed done cannot be undone. Oh! my lord, leave me my little share of happiness. Thou canst command the vast pleasures of the wide world, whilst I have only the simple joys of my home.”

But he stood there sullen, and answered: “Yield thyself to me or thy people shall all die.”

Suddenly she arose, and went close to him where he stood in his scowling anger, and she whispered into his

startled ear: "I will never be thine so long as my husband liveth. For if I go to thee he will slay me. Therefore, if thou be man enough, kill him as he sleepeth—it were best for thee, and best for me."

And the king stood staring before him, but answered not at all.

She plucked at his sleeve and said: "Kill him!"

The king roused and asked: "How shall I find him?"

And the woman answered: "'Tis easiest ever to kill a strong man when he sleeps. Come then at the dead of this night—go thou straight from hence until thou reachest a door of beaten copper: wait thou there until thou hearest the cry of an owl, and when thou hearest the owl cry, go in and slay him where he sleepeth." . . .

* * *

The moonlight fell athwart a bed of ebony, and upon the ebony bed lay a youthful form shrouded from head to foot in a white sheet of lawn. Mahomed, the king, his cloak wrapped about him, stepped stealthily to the bed, drew a weapon from its sheath, and the golden-hilted dagger gleamed in the moonlight and stabbed the still figure to the heart. As the king plucked the blade away, he dragged the covering from the face of the slain, and he gazed upon the marble face of the beautiful Parsee woman, smiling in death.

Like a wolferine of pestilence, Mahomed of the house of Ghazni crept slinking forth into the darkness.

That night he gave a mighty feast with wine and

dancing and revel; but through riot and the clash of cymbals and the drums and the shuffle of dancing-women's feet, the ears of the king were haunted by the song that a dagger had made.





The End

